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SUBJECT: USCIRF MEETING WITH VICE MINISTER OF PUBLIC SECURITY NGUYEN VAN HUONG

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1. (SBU) Summary: On October 23, members of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) met with GVN Vice Minister of Public Security (MPS) Nguyen Van Huong. Members asked Huong about the registration of Protestant organizations, establishing independent Buddhist religious organizations in Vietnam, and police training on human rights as well as individual cases. Huong agreed to allow access for the group to a prison to visit two prisoners of concern to USCIRF. End summary.

2. (SBU) On October 23, Nguyen Van Huong welcomed the USCIRF delegation to the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) for a meeting scheduled to last one hour, but which lasted two. He also hosted the delegation to lunch. Huong opened the meeting by noting the issue of religious freedom is regularly discussed between Vietnam and the United States. MPS is not made up of specialists on religious freedom so it welcomes USCIRF's interest. USCIRF Chairman Michael Cromartie noted that religious freedom was not solely a "U.S. idea," and that it existed in covenants of international law to which he hoped Vietnam would deepen its commitment, as it prepares to join the UN Security Council. He said he was interested in examining whether recent arrests of dissidents will derail progress on religious freedom, noting that "progress overall" had stalled recently. He then gave the floor to his four commissioner colleagues in turn.

3. (SBU) Commissioner Preeta Bansal asked about the prospects for registering Buddhist sects to make them independent of the national Buddhist association, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS). In reply, Huong noted that in 1981 the Buddhist community in Vietnam had decided to unite, but that some leaders were unsatisfied with the positions they received in the new organization. Huong said that Khmer Buddhists identified by some as "religious prisoners" had broken various laws, but added that USCIRF was free to meet with those directly involved and hear their stories when in the south. Bansal, noting that Huong had said at one point that "lawbreakers would be arrested," asked Huong point blank whether he was planning to arrest members of the UBCV. Huong said he has no such plans.

4. (SBU) Bansal noted that Vice Minister Huong had played a key role in opening up the Central Highlands for greater religious freedom, and asked whether he would help with the recognition of more than one Buddhist group if that were desired. Huong responded that under Vietnamese law there can only be one body for each religion. In the case of Protestantism there are many different churches and those are all recognized, but the GVN will not recognize more than one body for each religion or sect. He did not clarify, however, in what way Protestantism differed from Buddhism with regard to a national coordinating body.

5.(SBU) USCIRF Commissioner Felice Gaer noted allegations of abuse, including beating deaths, and asked Huong to accept lists of USCIRF persons of concern. Huong agreed to accept the lists. Gaer asked for help in facilitating visits to persons detained and their release, mentioning jailed human rights lawyers Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan. She further asked for an independent government body to be set up to look into abuse allegations, and inquired about training for police.

6.(SBU) Huong responded that Vietnam does not believe in or condone any kind of torture and that the abuse of authority was illegal and would be punished. He welcomed information on allegations, and said many GVN officials had been punished for misconduct. Not every case is made public, Huong said, but if the Commission was interested he could provide a list.

7.(SBU) Huong stated that Dai and Nhan were arrested not for expressing their political views, something that is done all the time in Vietnam's newspapers and not considered criminal. Rather, the two have been jailed for organizing resistance to the government beyond mere expressions of opinion. He said the appeal trials of Dai, Nhan and dissident Catholic priest Nguyen Van Ly would be held "in the near future," and that they would have good lawyers. He also said they potentially could benefit from amnesty or sentence reductions in the future if their convictions were upheld. He said he did not have the precise date of the appeal hearing, but that diplomats will be invited to attend. Huong said he was open to the idea of establishing a mechanism to review abuse allegations of law enforcement officials.

8.(SBU) Commissioner Donald Argue asked why prison authorities refuse to allow Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan to have Bibles and medicine from their families and why their appeal trials had been postponed beyond the statutory 90 days after the initial trial. He reiterated the request to visit the two in prison. Huong said that the Bibles and medicine were no problem and said he could facilitate a visit to the prison for the USCIRF delegation. He

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also asked when the USCIRF delegation would be available to visit the prison. Argue concluded by stating that he recognized that there has been much progress in Vietnam over recent years, not addressing Huong's query.

9.(SBU) Commissioner Imam Talal Y. Eid asked about the training of police with regard to upholding religious freedom and human rights, and whether international experts would be welcome to improve such training. Huong said a nation-wide round of training for local police officials had taken place and that short-term human rights training was part of the basic police course. Denmark has been particularly active in training Vietnamese police on human rights issues, Huong said, and he would be prepared to send officers to a human rights training course at the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in Bangkok. Commissioner Eid also asked to see the police training manuals regarding human rights, which Huong provided.

10.(SBU) At several points during the meeting, Huong reiterated that the GVN wished the delegation to meet and speak with a range of persons in Vietnam, and that he hoped the group would come to hold a "balanced" picture of advances in religious freedom. In this vein, he underscored that the group was free to meet with whomever it wished. As the meeting ended, Huong clarified his earlier comment, asking if the group wanted to visit Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan in prison that afternoon. The USCIRF Commissioners all responded positively. The group visited the two prisoners, outside Hanoi, later that day (septel).

11. (U) This message was cleared with USCIRF Chairman Cromartie.

MICHALAK